



Powerful Magic

Miniature Sculptures from
the Sepik River Region

BRUCE FRANK PRIMITIVE ART, NEW YORK



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In the heart of the ancient land of Papua New Guinea lives a mosaic of diverse peoples who have created some of the most beautiful, powerful, and incredibly surreal art known to mankind. Among the vast island's staggering variety of artistic styles and cultural traditions is a relatively little-recognized genre of exceptionally carved miniature figures. This book and the exhibition it documents together celebrate the extraordinary miniature sculptures from the Sepik and Ramu River region through some of the finest examples available, many of which carry with them exemplary pedigrees from museum and private collections.

The best of these diminutive objects possess all the awe and imposing force of the full-size ancestor figures and ritual masks more commonly known from the cultures they represent. Indeed, many of these small charms even transcend the aesthetics of their larger counterparts through an incredible attention to detail that reveals the true spirit and artistic prowess of the carvers who produced them, most of whose names have been lost to history. Such miniatures must be carved with extreme confidence and mastery. Their small scale is particularly unforgiving since the human eye calibrates the object to such a degree that even the slightest aesthetic error will invariably stand out.

With its extreme climate, frequent natural disasters, and high disease rate, New Guinea can be an inhospitable place. It is also notably fertile and abounds with life of astonishing diversity. Humans have inhabited this remote island for tens of thousands of years and, until recently, most have relied on stone technology. Some Westerners have labeled them "primitive," but this does not give these peoples credit for their obvious cultural complexities, their ability to adapt and survive, and their sublime artistic expression, the latter so sophisticated that it influenced some of the greatest European and American artists of the twentieth century. Ritual, ceremony, and sculpture represent intricate socioreligious systems that have long guided everyday life in New Guinea. These also represent a fundamental difference in perception and intent from our world. What we call "art" they see as a connection to their ancestors.

That said, we can only speculate as to the "true" meanings of these small figurative amulets. While we know that they relate to a broad context of ancestor veneration, their use has long been governed by initiatory societies and is veiled in ritual and secrecy. Western anthropologists have tried their best to embed themselves into New Guinea society, but only limited information has been given to most.



Above: "Old man from the lower Sepik before 1914 with a series of pendants in the form of small wooden figures, which are probably amuletic in nature."

Left: "Beard amulets" from *Opuscula Ethnologica Memoriae Ludovici Biró Sacra*.

Images courtesy of Michel Thieme and Anthony J. P. Meyer.

Based on their observations and the informants they queried, we believe that these amulets protected their owners from evil, warded off sickness, and, in some instances, even brought sickness upon evildoers. Some amulets aided in love. It is said that when a man was interested in a woman, an amulet in the form of a fruit bat was hung inside the living space of the woman he wanted to attract so the spirits would guide her to him (Welsch 1998).

One early explorer to the Sepik River region was American anthropologist A. B. Lewis. During his collecting trip to New Guinea in the early 1900s, Lewis recorded his observations in a field journal. He noted small wooden masks that were sometimes attached to woven bags called *bilum*, certain of which were owned by men and said to provide supernatural protection and success in hunting, fishing, and lovemaking. Figurative charms have also been associated with *bilum*. In addition to being attached to bags, these amulets were also worn around the neck (Welsch 1998). Sometimes important elders wore multiple small wooden figures in their beards (Meyer 2010).

Along the Sepik, the village as a whole was a macrocosm of life. It was more than just a community of the living, but was also a place where ancestors also resided among their descendants. This is evidenced by the hundreds of large ancestor tribute figures that were in the village, each paying homage to the ancestors as a part of everyday life. Small amulet figures may have functioned on a microcosmic level as a means for the individual to harness the power of the ancestors that was afforded to the entire village.

Cultures from across the globe with no contact whatsoever frequently share similar themes in their material culture. Charms and talismans of small scale are precious to many cultures and have long played a major role in day-to-day life. Miniature sculptures were produced by peoples as distant as the Dayak of Borneo and the Dan of West Africa, to name just two. Though entirely unrelated, these cultures both base their miniature works on larger counterparts. Among the Dayak, miniature charms were directly representational of the imposing village protective sculptures known as *hampatong*. Among the Dan, small "passport" maskettes were created as miniature versions of important ritual masks and conveyed something of the power and protection of that mask to the owner of the amulet. Such similarities have been said by some to speak of a "collective unconscious" that has propelled civilizations so foreign to one another to develop closely related ideas and rituals. Or perhaps this relates to an evolutionary quality



similar to Paleolithic tool technology, which shows incredible similarity from one early human group to another, even though the various peoples in question were never in contact geographically and may also have been separated by tens of thousands of years. Based on analogy provided by cultures such as the Dayak and Dan, can we

conclude that many of these Sepik charms are personal talismans relating to larger ancestor figures kept in the men's house, which are the property of the entire village? We do not know for certain, but it is not unreasonable speculation.

This exhibition is more than a group of sculptures. It is a showcase of a culture that for all intents and purposes has fallen extinct in favor of our way of life. These miniature objects are exquisite works of art, but they also provide a window into a magical world now vanished, where ancestral spirits spoke directly through and to the peoples of Papua New Guinea.

1 Amulet Figure

Madang Province, coastal Ramu River region, Manam Island

19th–early 20th century

Height: 4 3/4 inches / 12.1 cm

Wood

Provenance: Roger Budin, Geneva





2 Amulet Figure

East Sepik Province, Lower Sepik River region, Murik Lakes

19th—early 20th century

Height: 7 1/8 inches, 18.1 cm

Wood, fiber

Provenance: John and Marcia Friede, New York

Private collection

For an example most likely carved by the same artist, see Oceania: Art of the Pacific Islands in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, fig. 61



3 Amulet Figure

East Sepik Province, Lower Sepik River region, Murik Lakes

19th–early 20th century

Height: 4 inches / 10.2 cm

Wood

Provenance: Ernst Heinrich, Stuttgart

Yann Ferrandin, Paris

Craig Delora, New Jersey





4 Amulet Figures from a *Bilum* Bag

East Sepik Province, Lower Sepik River region, Murik Lakes

19th–early 20th century

Heights: center figure: 8 1/4 inches / 21 cm

left and right figures: 6 3/4 inches / 17.1 cm

Wood, fiber

Provenance: American Midwest collection

Nasser Gallery, New York

These figures were probably used to decorate a bush string bag called a bilum, some of which were used by men to carry personal ornaments, magical substances, and betel implements. It is rare to find a group of figures with their original fiber binding intact.





5 Amulet Figure

East Sepik Province, Lower Sepik River region, Murik Lakes

19th–early 20th century

Height: 5 1/4 inches / 13.3 cm

Wood

Provenance: Steyler Mission, Württemberg, Germany

Loed and Mia van Bussel, Amsterdam

John and Marcia Friede, New York



6 Amulet Figure

East Sepik Province, Lower Sepik River region, Murik Lakes

19th–early 20th century

Height: 5 inches / 12.7 cm

Wood

Provenance: Steyler Mission, Württemberg, Germany

Loed and Mia van Bussel, Amsterdam



7 Amulet Figure

East Sepik Province, Lower Sepik River region, Murik Lakes

19th–early 20th century

Height: 10 1/2 inches / 26.7 cm

Wood, fiber

Provenance: Serge Brignoni, Lugano

Marcia and John Friede, New York

Fred and Kathleen Taylor, San Francisco



8 Amulet Figure

East Sepik Province, Lower Sepik River region, Murik Lakes

19th–early 20th century

Height: 4 inches / 10.2 cm

Wood

Provenance: Fred and Kathleen Taylor, San Francisco



9 Amulet Figure

East Sepik Province, Lower Sepik River region, Murik Lakes

19th–early 20th century

Height: 4 3/4 inches / 12 cm

Wood

Provenance: Serge Brignoni, Lugano

John and Marcia Friede, New York

Craig Delora, New Jersey





10 Amulet Figure

East Sepik Province, Lower Sepik River region

19th–early 20th century

Height: 10 1/8 inches / 25.7 cm

Wood

Provenance: Walter Randel, New York

John and Marcia Friede, New York

Private collection

Published: *New Guinea Art: Masterpieces of the Jolika Collection*, fig. 118



11 Amulet Figure

East Sepik Province, Lower Sepik River region

19th–early 20th century

Height: 3 3/4 inches / 9.5 cm

Wood

Provenance: Steyler Mission, Württemberg, Germany

Loed and Mia van Bussel, Amsterdam



12 Amulet Figure

East Sepik Province, coastal Sepik River region

19th–early 20th century

Height: 4 3/4 inches / 12 cm

Wood, fiber, shell

Provenance: Philippe Guimiot, Brussels

John and Marcia Friede, New York



13 Amulet Figure

East Sepik Province, Sepik River region

19th—early 20th century

Height: 6 inches / 15.2 cm

Wood, pigment

Provenance: Walter Randel, New York

John and Marcia Friede, New York





14 Amulet Figure

East Sepik Province, Lower Sepik River region, Murik Lakes

19th—early 20th century

Height: 6 1/2 inches / 16.5 cm

Wood, fiber

Provenance: John and Marcia Friede, New York

This amulet is unique in that the animal totem at the top of the figure is facing sideways.

Typically on such figures, the animal always faces forward.



15 Figure from Headdress

Madang Province, lower Ramu River region

19th—early 20th century

Height: 8 1/8 inches / 20.7 cm

Wood, fiber, pigment

Provenance: Collected by Ben Birillo in the 1960s

John and Marcia Friede, New York

Published: *New Guinea Art: Masterpieces of the Jolika Collection*, fig. 75





16 Amulet Figure

East Sepik or Madang Province, coastal region, Sepik-Ramu estuary

19th–early 20th century

Height: 11 3/8 inches / 28.8 cm

Wood, fiber, pigment

Provenance: Walter Randel, New York

John and Marcia Friede, New York

Private collection

Published: *New Guinea Art: Masterpieces of the Jolika Collection*, fig. 67



17 Amulet Figure

East Sepik or Madang Province, coastal region, Sepik-Ramu estuary

19th–early 20th century

Height: 8 1/2 inches / 21.6 cm

Wood

Provenance: Fred and Kathleen Taylor, San Francisco





18 Amulet Figure

Madang Province, Ramu River region

19th–early 20th century

Height: 4 1/2 inches / 11.4 cm

Wood, pigment

Provenance: John and Marcia Friede, New York

This amulet is particularly unusual in that it has a very large head above a body that is compressed and armless.



19 Amulet Figure

Madang Province, coastal Ramu River region

19th–early 20th century

Height: 7 inches / 18 cm

Wood

Provenance: Suzanne Greub, Basel

Private collection

Published: *Authority and Ornament: Art of the Sepik River*, fig. 178



20 Amulet Figure

East Sepik or Madang Province, Lower Sepik or Ramu River region

19th—early 20th century

Height: 7 1/4 inches / 18.4 cm

Wood, fiber

Provenance: Fred and Kathleen Taylor, San Francisco





21 Amulet Figure

East Sepik or Madang Province, Lower Sepik or Ramu River region

19th–early 20th century

Height: 9 1/2 inches / 24.1 cm

Wood

Provenance: Steyler Mission, Wurtemberg, Germany (inv. no. 79.1.52)



22 Amulet Figure

East Sepik Province, lower Sepik River region

19th–early 20th century

Height: 8 1/2 inches / 21.6 cm

Wood

Provenance: Allen Wardwell, New York City



23 Amulet Figure

East Sepik Province, lower Sepik River region, possibly Singarin village, Kopar people

19th–early 20th century

Height: 9 3/8 inches / 23.8 cm

Wood

Provenance: Walter Randel, New York

John and Marcia Friede, New York

Published: *New Guinea Art: Masterpieces of the Jolika Collection*, fig. 64



24 Amulet Figure

East Sepik Province, lower Sepik River region, Singarin village, Kopar people

19th–early 20th century

Height: 7 3/4 inches / 19.7 cm

Wood

Provenance: John and Marcia Friede, New York

For a similar example of this rare type of amulet, see *Kunst vom Sepik*, vol. III,
fig. 454



25 Amulet Figure

East Sepik Province, middle Sepik River region, latmul people

19th century

Height: 8 1/8 inches / 20.6 cm

Wood

Provenance: Entered Germany before 1897

Königlichen Museum für Völkerkunde, Berlin

Arthur Speyer, Eltville, Germany

Ralph Nash, London

John and Marcia Friede, New York

Private collection

Published: *New Guinea Art: Masterpieces of the Jolika Collection*, fig. 212

Gefunden und Verloren, fig. 98



26 Janus Amulet Figure

East Sepik Province, middle Sepik River region, Sawos people

19th–early 20th century

Height: 8 3/8 inches / 21.2 cm

Wood

Provenance: Lorenz Eckert, Basel

John and Marcia Friede, New York

Private collection

Published: *New Guinea Art: Masterpieces of the Jolika Collection*, fig. 247



27 Amulet Figure

East Sepik Province, lower Sepik River region, Biwat people

19th—early 20th century

Height: 4 1/2 inches / 11.4 cm

Wood, shell

Provenance: Christophe Tzara, Paris





28 Amulet Figure

East Sepik Province, lower Sepik River region, Keram River

19th–early 20th century

Height: 6 1/2 inches / 16.5 cm

Wood

Provenance: John and Marcia Friede, New York

Fred and Kathleen Taylor, San Francisco



29 Amulet Figure

East Sepik Province, lower Sepik River region, Keram River, Banaro people

19th–early 20th century

Height: 9 3/4 inches / 24.7 cm

Wood

Provenance: Collected by a missionary of the Society of the Divine Word in 1913

Steyl Mission Museum, The Netherlands

John and Marcia Friede, New York

Private collection

Published: *New Guinea Art: Masterpieces of the Jolika Collection*, fig. 119



30 Hunting Amulet

East Sepik Province, lower Sepik River region, Yuat or Keram River region

19th–early 20th century

Height: 7 1/2 inches / 19 cm

Wood, shell, fiber, encrusted organic surface

Provenance: Collected by Dr. Fred Gerrits

John and Marcia Friede, New York

Private collection

Published: *Oceanic Art*, vol. 1, fig. 223



31 Hunting Charm

East Sepik Province, lower Sepik River region, between the Yuat
and Keram Rivers

19th—early 20th century

Height: 9 inches / 22.8 cm

Bark, natural red pigment

Provenance: Douglas Newton, New York

John and Marcia Friede, New York



32 Miniature Mask

East Sepik Province, Lower Sepik River region, Murik Lakes

19th–early 20th century

Height: 6 1/4 inches / 15.9 cm

Wood

Provenance: Fred and Kathleen Taylor, San Francisco



33 Miniature Mask

East Sepik Province, Lower Sepik River region, Murik Lakes

Early 20th century

Height: 5 3/4 inches / 14.6 cm

Wood, pigment

Provenance: John and Marcia Friede, New York

Private collection, New York

This maskette was probably used to decorate a bush string bag called a bilum, some of which were used by men to carry personal ornaments, magical substances, and betel implements.



34 Miniature Mask

East Sepik Province, Lower Sepik River region

19th–early 20th century

Height: 4 3/4 inches / 12 cm

Wood, fiber

Provenance: Loed and Mia van Bussel, Amsterdam

John and Marcia Friede, New York

This maskette was probably used to decorate a bush string bag called a bilum, some of which were used by men to carry personal ornaments, magical substances, and betel implements.



35 Miniature Mask

East Sepik or Madang Province, coastal region, Sepik-Ramu estuary

19th–early 20th century

Height: 7 inches / 17.8 cm

Wood

Provenance: Gustavo Schindler, New York

John and Marcia Friede, New York

Fred and Kathleen Taylor, San Francisco

This maskette was probably used to decorate a bush string bag called a bilum, some of which were used by men to carry personal ornaments, magical substances, and betel implements. The nose is pierced for attachment of ornaments.



36 Miniature Mask

East Sepik Province, lower Sepik River region, Singarin village, Kopar people

19th—early 20th century

Height: 5 1/2 inches / 14 cm

Wood, fiber, pigment

Provenance: Loed and Mia van Bussel, Amsterdam

John and Marcia Friede, New York





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